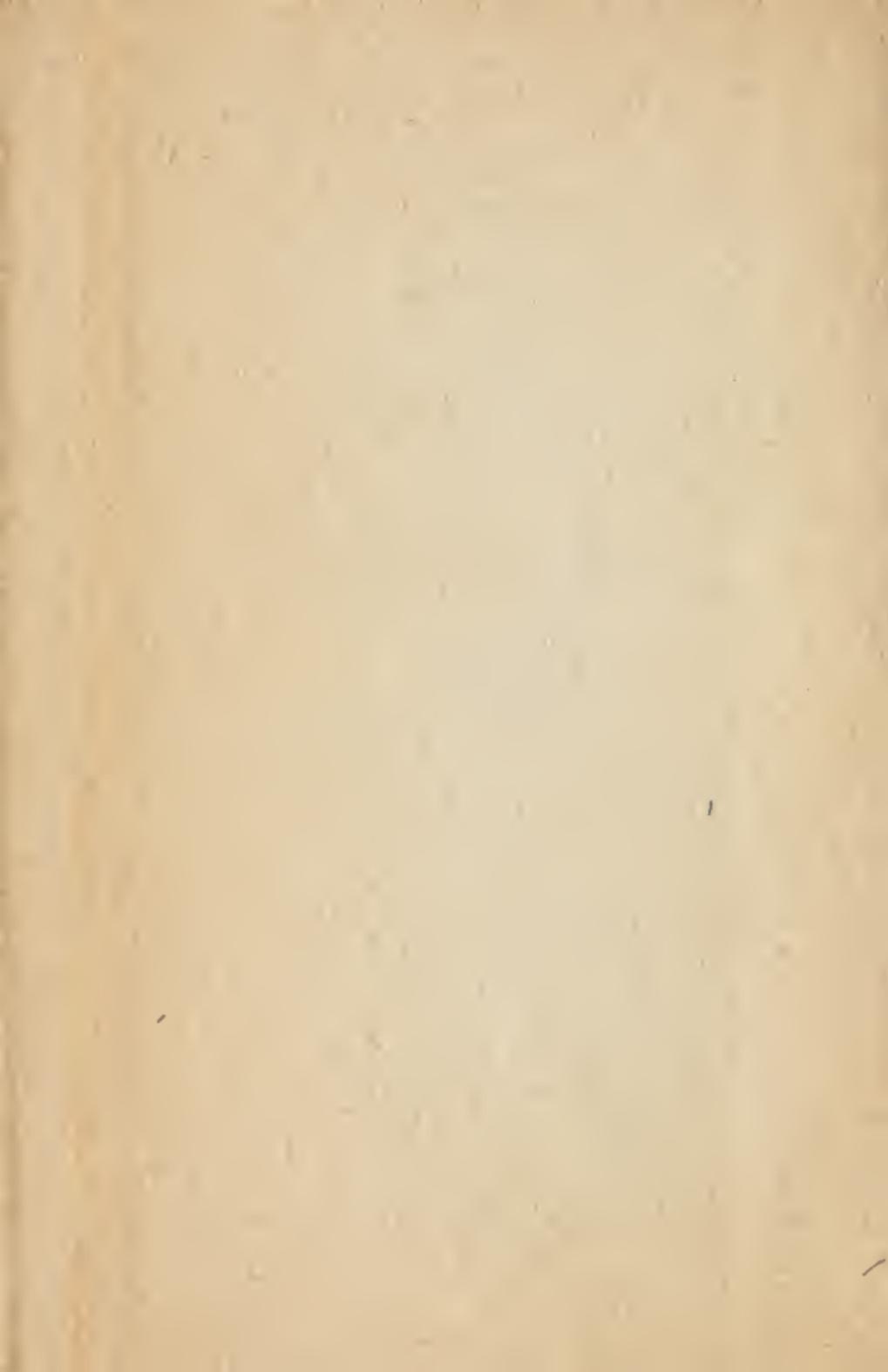


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MY STRANGE FRIEND.

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MY STRANGE FRIEND.

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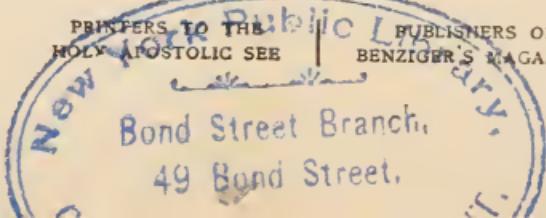
FRANCIS J. FINN, S.J.

Author of "Percy Wynn," "Tom Playfair," etc.

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CONTENTS.

	PAGE
MY STRANGE FRIEND,	7
LOOKING FOR SANTA CLAUS,	51

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MY STRANGE FRIEND.

I.

A FEW days after Christmas, I was sitting in my room, nursing an incipient cold, and wondering when my health would permit me to return to the seminary. At this period of my life I was heir to many ills, prominent among which was the dyspepsia. Headache in the morning from eight to ten, headache in the afternoon from two till about four, headache at night from seven indefinitely, then bed ; this constituted my daily order, dull enough surely in the read-

ing, but painfully dismal in the realization.

The cessation of my morning headache was almost due when my sister, singing gayly, tripped into my room with a letter, which she handed me with a mock bow.

“I am very much obliged to you, my dear, for bringing me this letter,” I remarked; “but now, really, couldn’t you dispense with your feminine war-whoop when you’re in my room?”

“Oh, you great, big, dyspeptic bear,” she laughed out, “you want me to take pattern after yourself, and go about like an unsuccessful undertaker.”

I felt my gorge rising at her remark, and was tempted to say something ungracious and bitter, as she danced

out through the doorway. That's the way with us dyspeptics ; we have no sympathy for sweet human life, and are especially high with our near relatives.

Without stopping, however, to analyze my feelings, I tore open the letter and read :

FAIRMOUNT GROVE, January 12, 1874.

MR. THOMAS MAXON :

Dear old Tom, I can never forgive myself the language I used previous to our parting. What a pity that supper ever came off at all. But I am now so heartily ashamed and penitent that I know you will forgive and forget. And now you can do me a great, a very great service, and I feel positive that you will not refuse me. I have heard that you are unwell. Come out here in the pure country air and spend a month with

me. It will surely do you good, while beyond all doubt it will serve me untold gain. Oh! my dear, dear friend (for I trust that you have already forgiven me, and are my friend again), come and see me. I have changed greatly, and am very miserable. The strange darkness that has come over my life I may not, cannot tell. Some terrible power imposes silence upon me, though I would give worlds to confide it to you, dear Tom. But come, come ; let yourself be the answer to this note. Ever your loving friend,

WILBER STONE.

I read this letter with mingled sentiments of pleasure and of pain ; pleasure, that it reconciled me with the dearest friend of my boyhood ; pain, that judging by the tenor of his communication, a terri-

ble, saddening change had come upon him.

Wilber Stone and myself had been chums at college. Beginning together, we had gone on from class to class, dividing (let me say in all modesty) the honors between us. While studying rhetoric, a prize was offered for the best essay on Longfellow. We were both admirers of the poet, and set to work at the task with ardor. The day before the essays were to be handed in Wilber, on invitation, came to my house to see my paper. He read it carefully, praising what pleased him, and, like a true friend, frankly pointing out what he considered its defects.

“Well, Wilber,” I said when he had finished, “suppose you let me see your own essay.”

“Willingly,” he answered, and took from his coat a bundle of manuscript.

I read it eagerly.

“It’s no use my handing in,” I remarked when I had come to the end of it. “Your essay will certainly take first place: no boy in the class can come near it.”

“You think it better than your own?”

“Better!” I exclaimed warmly. “Why, Wilber, I couldn’t write like that in a year’s time. Yes, Wilber, my boy, I’m beaten squarely.”

A strange look came over his face. But instead of continuing the conversation, he caught up his hat, bade me good-evening, and abruptly left the house.

A month later the gold medal was awarded.

“The prize for the best essay on Longfellow is awarded to——” Here the vice-president of the college paused to clear his throat. I was sitting next to Wilber, and patted him on the back.

“Get ready to go up, old boy,” I whispered.

Wilber’s face was strangely pale; and so nervous had he grown that he was unable to return my smile.

“Is awarded,” the vice-president continued, “to Thomas Maxon.”

This was one of the greatest surprises of my school life. Amidst hearty applause, I found myself—how I got there I know not—on the stage, receiving from the hands of the president the gold medal. But I was far from being satisfied.

“Wilber,” I said, when I had re-

gained my seat, "this is a mistake."

"Next in merit," continued the vice-president, now that the applause had subsided, "George Murray and Francis Elaine."

"What!" I gasped. "Why, you're not even mentioned. I'm going to ask our professor about this just as soon as this affair is over."

"No, no, Tom," whispered Wilber, more nervous than before; "you mustn't do any such thing. You have honestly earned the medal."

I attributed his nervousness and his words to bitter disappointment.

"But I will," I answered hotly, for I was burning with indignation at what I could not but consider a cruel mistake.

My dear friend spent some time in

persuading me not to make any inquiries in the matter, but he was unsuccessful.

“Mr. Warden,” I said, touching my cap to my professor, as we met outside the exhibition hall, “how is it that Wilber got no mention for his essay on Longfellow? I read it, and felt sure that his was far superior to mine.”

“The reason is simple,” answered Mr. Warden. “Wilber neglected to hand in his essay.”

Then the truth flashed upon me. I turned away with the tears standing in my eyes. The medal was now indeed valuable to me; it was the sacred memorial of a heroic act of friendship.

But poor Wilber, noble as he was, had grave faults. He exhibited two

traits which made me tremble for his future. One was an ungovernable pride, the other, an outgrowth of the first, an unwillingness to take advice. He went through life “at his own sweet will.”

The latter defect came into prominence during our year of philosophy. He grew captious about revealed truth, sneered at the classic answers to philosophical and theological difficulties, and occasionally gave voice to opinions which shocked me. Despite my protestations and the warning of some of the professors, who took a deep interest in him, he chose as a friend a fellow-student whose standing, both as to class and to character, was at the lowest. Insensibly there arose a coolness between us ; not that we ceased to be friends,

but that our plans and pursuits had become so widely divergent.

On the night of Commencement exercises we philosophers, having finished our course, sat down to a parting banquet before separating in the great world.

The first hour passed pleasantly enough, though I noticed with uneasiness that Wilber was drinking freely. By and by the talk turned upon the valedictory which I had delivered.

"The allusion to Our Lord you brought in," said one, "was very beautiful, and, at the same time, came in so naturally."

Wilber gave a scornful laugh, such a laugh that conversation came to a stop, and all eyes turned upon him. Then, flushed with ^{his} person.

such words of Our Saviour as I have not the heart to record.

Every one present was aghast at the blasphemous language ; many looked at me. They knew that I was shortly to enter a seminary, and seemed by common consent to place me in the position of spokesman.

“ Wilber,” I said, rising, and the pain I felt at that moment I shall never forget, “ I cannot stay in your company, if you choose to speak such language.”

“ Free country, young Levite,” cried Wilber, his face hardening with pride. “ We’re not in the class-room now, Deacon, and I’ll say just what I please.”

Then he went on to utter further us’asnotmy. With a heavy heart I ~m whilst he was still

speaking, followed by all except Wilber and his evil genius, the classmate against whom he had been so vainly warned. On the following day Wilber departed for the East with his family, and though one year and a half had gone by from the time of that unhappy banquet, I had not seen him since.

On re-reading his letter I decided to comply with his request at once, and accordingly I arrived at the depot near Fairmount Grove that afternoon at three o'clock.

What was my dismay when I saw awaiting me at the depot not the gay, handsome athletic Wilber of college days, but a sad, gaunt, hollow-eyed young man, so changed in appearance that I could hardly bring myself to believe it was the same person.

As he caught my eyes, his face lighted up with pleasure.

“ O Tom, Tom ! how glad, how very glad I am to see you.”

I rushed forward to give him a hearty handshake, but he drew back with an air of timidity ill-befitting the bold Wilber of former days. Recovering himself by an evident effort, he took my hand in his. He held it for a moment in a cold, pressureless grasp, and then drew back as though he had done a guilty deed.

“ Your hand is cold,” he said nervously.

I looked at him closely, but the welcome on his face belied his actions. I was puzzled.

“ You find something strange about me, Tom,” he said in reply to my look, “ but if you only knew all.

Don't think that you are not most welcome. Here, jump in," he added, motioning to a sleigh that I knew to be his.

As we jingled along to Fairmount Grove we fell into an earnest talk about old times, in the course of which, however, through motives of delicacy, I avoided bringing in a single allusion to matters of religion, fearing that perhaps it might awaken unpleasant memories.

"So you are studying for the priesthood?" he resumed after a short lull in our conversation.

"Yes, Wilber; and I hope to give my whole life to the service of God."

What was my astonishment when, at the mention of the sacred name, he released one hand from its hold upon the reins, and lifted his hat with an

air of devotion that was a sermon in itself.

“ Ah ! Wilber,” I cried in delight, “ I knew it would end so ; I knew that you would come back to the old way of looking at things.”

He turned his face towards mine, and with a frightened, wistful expression in his eyes, asked :

“ Tom, what does our divine Lord say about the scandalizing of little ones ?”

“ It were better that a millstone were placed about the scandalizer’s neck, and that he were cast into the depth of the sea.”

“ Just so,” he responded with a sigh, and an expression that was pitiful, “ and yet He is such a good, such a merciful God, too.”

“ Indeed, He is,” I answered.

“ We can none of us begin to understand how tenderly God loves us.”

“ Say that again,” he said softly, while a smile warmed his face into melancholy beauty.

I repeated my words and continued to talk in the same strain, as I saw what evident pleasure the subject afforded him. When I had come to a pause, he added :

“ And yet He is so terrible in His denunciations of those who scandalize His little ones.”

“ Yes,” I made reply, “ but there is forgiveness for them if they repent. But cheer up, Wilber ; what makes you so sad ?”

“ I have many reasons, Tom. Just one month ago mother died.”

“ Indeed !—your mother dead ? O Wilber ! why didn’t you let me

know? It must have been an awful blow to you."

"But that's not the worst, Tom. I knew for a month before that some one very dear to me was going to die."

I was again amazed.

"How in the world did you know that?"

"I can't tell, Tom, but listen"—his voice sank to a whisper—"what day of the month is this?"

"The fourteenth of January."

"Very well, on the twentieth of January"—here he paused, while the lines upon his face indicated some terrible agony—"on the twentieth of January—O my God!—some one else dear to me will die."

The groan which accompanied his ejaculation sent a shiver through

me ; I began to fear that I was in the company of a madman. But he read my thoughts as though I had framed them in words.

"No, no ; it is no hallucination ; I am not out of my senses," he exclaimed ; "nor can I now explain to you how I know such things ; but what I say is true."

I made no reply, and my silence might have been awkward were it not for the fact that at this juncture we turned into the winding roadway which leads up to the spacious country house of Fairmount Grove. Standing at the gate was a bevy of boys and girls, from the tot of three to the hoyden of fifteen, smiling and waving hats and handkerchiefs at my delighted self. I remembered them all—the "tigers" was my name

for them—and, if signals of welcome go for anything, they remembered me.

“Hurrah!” cried Charlie, the oldest lad of the group, a cousin of Wilber’s, “here’s Uncle Tom come at last.”

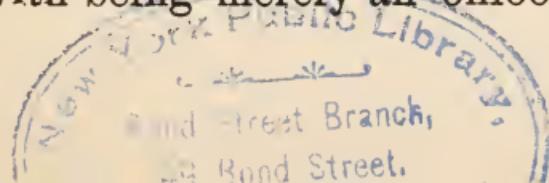
Though I was in nowise related to any of Wilber’s cousins, they had insisted on calling me Uncle Tom from the first time that I showed myself to their delighted eyes in the full dress of young manhood.

No sooner had the horse come to a stop before the gate than all the tigers, with the exception of the two older ones, sprang upon me with a series of joyful screams and friendly struggles, pulled me from my seat and out of the vehicle, and cast me down into a deep bank of snow, the

more astute of them in the meanwhile emptying my overcoat pockets of various small packages, which, little rogues, they knew I would not fail to bring by way of a peace-offering.

We had a merry time of it on that winter afternoon, the tigers pulling me this way and that, forcing me to play the elephant, exhausting my entire stock of fairy tales, then clamoring for more, and, in fine, exacting of their Uncle Tom ample amends for his long absence. It was great fun for them, and, I may add without apology, for myself, too ; for I love little children, and sincerely pity the man who does not.

Throughout this round of amusement Wilber had contented himself with being merely an onlooker. He



37389

witnessed our rompings and tumblings with a strange, sad, timorous, yet pleased expression, and whenever he spoke to the children, it was in so sweet a voice, in so gentle a manner, that one would think he was addressing himself to superior beings. As we were going up the stairway at bedtime, I made a remark to that effect.

" You are right, Tom," he answered ; " I do regard them as superior beings ; for they are, God be thanked for it, pure and innocent, and whenever I am in their company, I cannot help bearing in mind that their guardian angels ever see the face of their Father who is in heaven."

Once more was I impressed with the thrilling, awe-inspiring reverence

of his voice and expression. It was such a change in Wilber, who of all my school companions and friends had ever been the least reverent.

“Here,” he continued, throwing open a door, “this is your room. It is next to mine.”

“Good,” I said; “if I feel at all wakeful, which is not at all likely after the events of this day, I will give you a call.”

With an air of secrecy he closed the door, and said to me in a tone of voice which was little more than a whisper:

“Tom, my friend, if I should happen to come in here during the night at any time, you wouldn’t mind it, would you?”

“Certainly not, Wilber; you shall be most welcome,” I replied, though

I must confess that I could not control a motion of astonishment.

“Thank you very much. And, Tom, if you note anything strange or out of the way in my conduct in case I come in, you must try not to mind. I should like to—to tell you all, if I dared ; but I really cannot—at least, not yet. Perhaps the time will soon come.”

“But, at any rate, tell me this, Wilber, is not your health seriously affected ? You look far from being a well man. You are very thin and worn, and are excessively nervous.”

“I can’t tell—I can’t speak out,” he made answer in a voice that had become loud and hoarse. Then he caught at his throat as though he were choking, and resumed in a lower key : “*It is wearing me away. Doc-*

tors have examined me, and have all been obliged to give it up ; and no wonder. But good-night, Tom. Suppose we shake hands ; you are warm now.''

He shook my hand with almost an excess of cordiality, and then quietly departed, leaving me to wonder and surmise far into the night.

I had not long been asleep, so far as I could judge, when an uneasy sensation to the effect that something or some one was in the room began to trouble my slumbers. After a few struggles I succeeded in awaking sufficiently to realize that a man was in the room. I sat up fully awake, and discovered by the pale light of the moon shining full through my window that Wilber, his face distorted by terror, was beside me.

“Come closer, Wilber,” I said, endeavoring, despite an uncanny feeling, to put a note of cordial welcome into my voice.

“Oh, I am so glad that you are awake,” he whispered. “Let me be near you. Let me take your hand. There, now, my dear friend, lie down again and try to go to sleep. Don’t talk. You need your rest. All I ask is to be near you.”

I ventured to make a few remarks, but he begged me to compose myself to sleep.

He sat beside me on the bed, meanwhile, holding my hand, his large, lustrous eyes distended with fright. Occasionally, in a tone so low and indistinct that I rather apprehended than heard what he said, he muttered, “On the twentieth of January,

one that is near and dear to me will die."

It is needless to say that I slept little. At the first break of day he stole away quietly.

The following night witnessed a repetition of the same incident, whereupon I suggested to Wilber that he should make my room his own, a suggestion which he accepted with alacrity. His bed was removed to my room, and we were thus brought almost constantly together. From that time and until January the nineteenth all went well. Then came the twentieth of January.

"Tom," he said, on that memorable night as we entered our room, "may I ask a particular favor of you?"

"Certainly, Wilber; I shall be

only too glad to do you any favor in my power."

"Thank you, Tom. Please, then, stay up with me to-night, for I know that I shall not be able to sleep."

"With pleasure, Wilber; but how shall we pass the time?"

"Tell me something about God's mercy, Tom; I love to hear you speak on that topic."

Fortunately, just previous to my visit I had read and pondered over Father Florentine Bondreaux's excellent work, entitled "God, Our Father," and so I could speak with some fluency on this beautiful subject. Wilber listened to me with an interest which was intense, although at times strange fits of trembling came upon him.

"But, Wilber," I said when one

of these paroxysms had passed, “ do you really entertain any doubts of God’s mercy ?”

“ No, no,” he exclaimed earnestly, throwing out his hands with vehemence. “ Not a man living, I dare say, has more reason to have faith in His goodness than I ; and the very secret which is consuming me teaches me how very, very good He is.”

“ But if the secret is injuring you so much, why not tell it to——”

I stopped short, for an expression so unearthly and awe-inspiring had come over his face, that it would be useless to attempt its description. To this day that expression haunts me. As it came upon him he sprang from his chair, and, with bated breath, appeared to be listening. A moment passed, another and another,

amidst a dead silence made horrible by the ticking of the great hall clock ; then, with a sob, he sank back upon his chair, and bending low his head, buried his face in his hands.

“ Dead ! dead ! ” he groaned.

“ Who,” I faltered, wiping my brow, for I too was possessed by fear. The clock sounded eleven as he answered :

“ Ah ! I shall know soon enough.”

The remaining hours of the night passed slowly, but from that moment Wilber became more composed. At the first gray dash of dawn upon the blackness of the eastern horizon, he fell into a heavy sleep, and, taking advantage of this, I threw myself upon my bed and was soon unconscious.

I had not slept beyond two hours

when I was awakened by some one pulling at my sleeve. It was Charlie, Wilber's cousin, to whom I have already referred. His eyes were wet with tears.

"Hello!" I exclaimed; "what's the matter, Charlie?"

"Papa's dead," said Charlie, beginning to cry afresh. "He died at our house in town last night, and I shall never see him again."

II.

CHARLIE's father had been Wilber's best-beloved uncle. Yet the bitterness of loss fell more easily upon my friend than the vague presentiment of it, and from that time he began to rest more quietly. I flattered myself, therefore, that the worst was over, and that Wilber's troubles had already touched their highest mark.

About eleven o'clock on the night of February the fourth, however, I was aroused by some one clutching my arm. Looking up I saw Wilber in such an agony, as God grant I may never again witness upon the face of any human being. His eyes, pro-

truding from his head, gleamed with a strange light, his limbs were quivering and so unsteady that he swayed from side to side, while his face was moist and beaded with perspiration.

“ Wilber, Wilber ! what ails you ?” I cried.

“ Oh my God !” he murmured.

There was no need for me to question further. I saw it all now. Another warning had come, and together we were to face the tortures of thirty nights of presentiment.

Like a drowning man he clung to my arm, and held it hour for hour, shivering and praying till the glad dawn broke.

The days that followed were indeed gloomy. Wilber appeared to be unequal to this fresh trial, and every hour seemed to set its seal of decay

upon him. In two weeks' time he was hardly able to go about. His doctor, a man high in the profession, said that the case was baffling in every respect.

But strange to say, as Wilber's physical faculties grew weaker, his will and mind gathered strength. His gloomy fits became rarer, and he began to sleep quite soundly. In lieu of the weariness and unrest that formerly possessed his features, there came gradually a look of deep calm and abiding peace. Towards the end of February he was obliged to keep to his bed.

On March the third he called me to his side, and begged to be allowed to speak to me alone.

All left the room, and I seated myself upon his bed.

"Tom," he began, "you know what is going to happen soon. Some one near to me is going to die."

I bowed my head.

"Do you know who it is?"

"No, Wilber."

"But I do," he answered with a certain triumph in his manner.
"It's myself; and I am so happy, Tom, for I know who it is that will judge me."

He pointed to a picture of the Sacred Heart on the wall.

"That most loving Heart is the Heart of my Judge."

Ah! how beautiful he looked as his face softened with love and hope.

"I'm afraid, Wilber, that you are right. God is about to take you away. But I am glad, indeed I am, that you are in such peace."

“ Before I do anything else, Tom, I want to tell you of that awful mystery, for I feel at last that I can talk of it. When you become a priest of God it may be of service to you. Ah ! Tom, sometimes I think that I might have become a priest if I hadn’t gone wrong. Then I’d have done some good, but now here I am a wreck. It’s too late. ‘ Too late, too late, you cannot enter now.’ ”

His voice trembled as he quoted Tennyson’s exquisite paraphrase.

“ You remember,” he went on, “ my conduct on graduation night ? Well, I carried on in that way, blaspheming God and His saints, but always careful to keep such words and sentiments from my relations. When mother and I returned from our trip East things went on smoothly till

last Christmas a year ago. During the holidays all my little cousins and nephews and nieces—your tigers, you know—came here for a visit, and for a few days we were a merry party. Shortly after New Year's day I wanted to go to town to hear a certain lecturer who made fun of religion for one dollar a head. Somehow my father came to hear of my purpose. He called me to his room, gave me a severe scolding, and ordered me not to leave home for a month. He was furious, but before he had said much—you know my pride, Tom—I was furious, too, and there were high words between us. On returning to my room I found a letter on my desk with news of the sudden death of one of my new friends. You know the kind of a friend that means, Tom,

but I really had liked him very much.

“The dinner hour then found me in a most unhappy frame of mind. After some attempts to compose myself I strode into the dining-hall, where father, mother, and all those little children were already seated, and without looking at any one I threw myself into a chair.

“‘Wilber,’ said my father, ‘you forget your grace.’

“‘No, I don’t. Bah! as if there were anything to be thankful for.’

“O Tom! you should have seen how pale and puzzled and frightened those little children became. And my dear mother! When I think of the sad look that came upon her sweet face, and see her put her trembling hand to her heart, I can hardly

keep from weeping. And yet, brute that I was, I didn't soften in the least ; no, not even when her trembling hand rested upon my cheek, and her dear eyes filled with tears. My father could not speak.

"Poor mother was dazed ; I could see it. She could not credit her ears ; with an effort she mastered herself and spoke.

"'Come, my dear boy,' she said, in her gentlest tones, 'you are not yourself. God has been ever good to us ; there is nothing we can ask for that He has not given us.'

"'Indeed !' I exclaimed in the brutality of pride, 'there are a good many things He doesn't give us, seeing He's such a good God.' Tom, I should have stopped there, at least. For again my mother's hand went to

her heart, her lips quivered, and all the happiness of her life left her face ; but, God forgive me, I went on, and added : ‘ Why, for instance, can’t I know beforehand when my friends are going to die ? ’

“ ‘ O Wilber ! ’ and the words sounded as though they came from a broken heart, ‘ that I should live to see this day,’ and my mother buried her head in her hands.

“ I see it again, those little children, their innocent faces fixed in horror, my mother bent in grief, my father utterly at a loss what step to take. There I sat gazing haughtily upon all, when suddenly I sprang to my feet and would have fled, but that I was rooted to the spot. There was a cold, clammy grip upon my shoulder. I turned, but there was

no one behind me, and still that cold, chilling pressure, as of an icy hand, moved slowly along my arm, till it caught my hand with a strength that I cannot describe, for it was not the strength of physical force, and words stop short of beginning to describe it. Then my hand, released of that awful grip, dropped powerless to my side, while in my ears I heard the sound as of a death-rattle. I gazed wildly about the room, and saw that all were looking at me in utter consternation.

“ I attempted to cry out, but it was impossible for me to utter a sound. At length the rattle ceased, the spell was broken, and I rushed from the hall and sought refuge in my own room. For hours I paced up and down in the most terrible mental suf-

ferring ; then, at random, I picked up a book, which chanced to be a collection of autographs, and opened it at these words :

“ ‘ I shall love thee even after the cold hand of death hath touched thee.’

“ I threw the book aside with my first sense of terror revived. An hour later I took up another book. This time it was the Bible. Perhaps you may guess what I read :

“ ‘ But he that shall scandalize one of these little ones that believe in Me, it were better for him that a mill-stone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be drowned in the depth of the sea.’

“ One month from that day another of my former friends died. Then I knew what that strange occurrence meant. God had heard my

wish, to punish and correct me. Three months later the same dreadful feeling, and a month later my mother died. Tom, I had hastened her death ; I had broken her heart.

“ You know the rest, Tom ; but you cannot see, as I do, how merciful God has been to me. Oh ! He is indeed a good God, and what seems His severest chastisements are often His tenderest mercies.”

Late the next evening all the little ones gathered about the bed of the dying man. In faltering accents he told them enough of his secret to repair, as far as could be, the dreadful scandal ; and the sobs of his listeners were the only interruption.

“ Wilber, my boy,” said his father, “ as you yourself say, God has been indeed most merciful to you.”

"Yes, father, and I have often thought that, aside from my mother's prayers, He did it to reward me for the one heroic act of my life. It was heroic for me when, through love for Tom here and to humble my pride, I gave up my chance for that Longfellow prize."

A few moments later the hand of death had lost its power over him forever.

LOOKING FOR SANTA CLAUS.

I.

ON Christmas Eve towards night-fall Johnnie Graham and his sister Minnie were curled upon the floor near the kitchen stove, looking over the pictures in an old magazine. Little Minnie was explaining the pictures to her brother. The Kansas wind was howling about the house, and driving the snow high against the window-panes. Without all was darkness, save for the few lights to the west, where lay the village of St. Maure's. At a table beside the children Mrs. Graham was washing the dishes.

“ Halloa !” cried Johnnie, jumping to his feet. “ I hear some one a-coming.” And he rushed eagerly to the door.

The sound of feet shuffling through the snow was followed by an impatient knock. Johnnie threw open the door, and found himself facing a man with a telegram in his hand.

“ It’s for your father, and immediate.” And with these words the messenger disappeared into the darkness.

“ I hope it is not bad news,” said Mrs. Graham.

“ May I run to the stable, and bring it to papa ?” cries Johnnie.

“ Yes, dear.”

“ And may I go too, mamma ?” asks Minnie.

Forthwith at the mother's nod the two go tripping through the snow, and soon reach the stable, a stout structure distant a stone's throw from the house.

There are four horses in it—one of them, Witch Winnie, is the finest horse in the West. Mr. Graham is a lover of horses.

"Papa, here's a telegram," cries Johnnie.

"And it's marked immediate," adds Minnie.

Mr. Graham, who had been fondly stroking his favorite racer, hurried from the stall, and tore open the enclosure. His face changed as he read these words :

"TOPEKA, KANSAS.

"Your sister is dying and calls for you—not an hour to spare.

"JOHN TALBOT."

“ Is it something bad, papa ? ” asks Minnie, catching her father’s right hand, while Johnnie, saying nothing, but looking no less sympathetic, takes the other.

“ Yes, your auntie is very sick, and I have just about three-quarters of an hour to get ready and take the train. Come, little ones, we must tell mother at once.”

“ Surely it never rains but it pours,” exclaimed Mrs. Graham on hearing the news. “ Yesterday poor John was called away to the side of his dying mother in Kansas City.”

John was their man-of-all-work, a steady, faithful young fellow, who, after his love for each and every one of the Grahams, was devoted heart and soul to the horses.

“ I don’t like to leave you alone on

any night, my dear," said Mr. Graham, "but especially on Christmas night."

"But you must go to Annie's side ; and besides I'm not afraid. Everything is secure. We've lived here now for over two years, and nothing has gone wrong."

"And, papa, if you go, do you think Santa Claus will come ?" asked Johnnie anxiously.

"Why, of course. I've sent him word that I've put the Christmas tree in the hay-loft, so that he won't make the mistake of coming to our house. To-morrow when you and Minnie wake up you may run over to the stable, and you'll find out that Santa Claus can get through the stoutest door in Kansas, even though it has the strongest kind of a lock."

"And, papa," said Minnie, "what time does Santa Claus come?"

"Oh, about twelve o'clock."

Half an hour later Mr. Graham was kissing them all farewell.

"Papa, may I keep the key of the stable?" asked Johnnie.

"Here it is; don't lose it, my little man."

"And may we go over and see Witch Winnie just once more to-night, papa?" chimed in Minnie.

"Of course. Well, good-by, dear, and God bless you."

II.

JOHNNIE had been sleeping for some hours in his little cot when Minnie tiptoed into the room.

“ Johnnie,” she whispered at his ear.

The child turned uneasily.

“ Johnnie,” she whispered again.

“ What’s the matter? Is it Christmas?”

“ O Johnnie!” she continued as the boy sat up in bed, “ it’s just eleven o’clock.”

“ I want to go to sleep. Go ’way,” said the brother, lying down again.

“ But wouldn’t you like to see Santa Claus?”

"What!" cried the lad, leaping out of his bed.

"You know, papa said he would come about midnight. I haven't been able to sleep for thinking of it. Let us go over to the stable and keep perfectly quiet, and maybe we shall see him."

"We dasn't go," said Johnnie.

"Yes, we may go," answered Minnie. "Don't you remember that I asked papa to go over and see Witch Winnie to-night?"

"That's so."

A few minutes later two little forms glided over the snow, unlocked the door, and slipped into the stable.

"Shall we leave the door open for Santa Claus?" asked Johnnie.

"I think not," Minnie answered. "It might hurt his feelings."

Johnnie locked the door.

"O-o-o-oh ! It's dark in here ; I'm afraid."

"Sh !" cried Minnie. "I have matches, dear, and we can light the candles, if we wish. But then Santa Claus might see that you and I were watching for him, and then maybe he would be displeased. Come, let us get in Witch Winnie's stall, and climb into the manger. She'll be company for us."

Witch Winnie gave a little neigh of joy when she felt the hands of her two dearest little friends caressing her. Then there was an unbroken silence.

One minute passed—though Johnnie thought it an hour—when a stealthy step was heard without.

"He's coming !" cried Minnie, breathing quickly.

The steps ceased at the door ; then there came a low whistle.

At the sound Witch Winnie gave another neigh of joy.

“ Why, even our horse is glad that Santa Claus is coming,” whispered Johnnie.

“ Sh !” hissed Minnie.

For a minute or two there was a fumbling at the lock.

“ I think I’ll go and help Santy,” whispered Johnnie. “ Maybe he’s not used to that kind of a lock.”

He was about to leap from the manger to carry out his purpose when the lock turned, the door opened, and in the light afforded by a lantern in his hand they saw a man standing in the doorway.

He was wrapped in a heavy coat encrusted by snow—and so far re-

sembled the pictures of Santa Claus. He wore a beard, too—but it was black. There was no pack upon his shoulders, no smile on his face. In one hand was a lantern, in the other a pistol. He was frowning, too, and did not look at all jolly.

Johnnie's heart sank. In fact, he began to doubt whether it was Santa Claus.

The man stood still for one moment, and then whistled as before.

Witch Winnie answered by a low, joyful neigh.

"Ah, there she is," muttered the man under his breath.

Johnnie could stand it no longer.

"Halloo, Santy Claus!" he cried in nervous tones.

The man gave a start, and then, raising his pistol at full cock, threw

the glare of the lantern full upon Witch Winnie and the two little ones.

It was a pretty picture. The mare standing with her superb head turned eagerly towards the newcomer, Minnie clasping her on one side and Johnnie on the other, both of them looking fearlessly at the man with the cocked pistol.

“Aren’t you Santa Claus?” cried Minnie.

The stranger lowered his pistol, and advanced.

“Yes, my little ones,” he said, “I am Santa Claus.”

“I knew it!” cried Johnnie. “Even Witch Winnie knows it. See how glad she is to see you! Why, she looks at you just the same as she looks at papa. Oh, I’m awful glad

to see you, Santy. But where is your pack?"

"It's outside. Do you little ones expect any presents?"

"Of course we do," answered Minnie. "This little boy is Johnnie, and I am Minnie. Papa told us you were coming to-night, so we stole over to see you come in."

"Well, little ones," said Santa Claus in a rather stern voice, "it's against my rules to allow any one to see me at work. Now, if you want to get a lot of the very nicest Christmas presents, you must make me a promise."

"All right, Santy Claus," cried Johnnie.

"You must go right back to the house, and go to sleep, and not say another word till sunrise to-morrow. Now, do you promise?"

“ Cross my heart,” cried the boy.

“ And so shall I promise,” added Minnie ; “ but first, dear Santa Claus, I want you to do me a favor. Papa told us that you came in place of the Infant Jesus. Is that so ?”

“ Y-yes,” said Santa Claus, coughing uneasily, and putting away his pistol as though he were ashamed of it.

“ Well, we know how much you must love the little Infant, and I thought that you would like to take a look at the crib which papa fixed up for us. There are twenty candles, and the little Infant is just lovely. Come on, Santa Claus, here’s my hand.”

Santa Claus shivered as the child put her confiding hand in his. He was in a great hurry ; but a little

child led him, led him to the other side of the stable into a vacant stall.

Striking a match, Minnie lighted a number of colored candles, revealing a beautiful wax figure of the Child Jesus lying with folded arms upon a small square platform hardly more than an inch in thickness.

“Auntie Jane was over in Paris,” explained Minnie, “and she bought this for us. Isn’t it sweet?”

“It is,” said the man, upon whose brow a faint moisture had broken out.

“Now, Santa Claus, I know you want to kneel down and pray. Johnnie and I always do.”

Santa Claus knelt. He bowed his head, and did not see what Minnie was doing. Suddenly he gave a start, and looking up saw Minnie

sinking to her knees, while from the little platform which supported the figure came a sweet, tinkling Christmas melody. It was Adams' *Noel*, and he shivered again, and the moisture upon his forehead gathered into beads as he listened to the sweetly sad strains.

“Look,” whispered Minnie.

Suddenly the waxen infant opened its sweet blue eyes, while the tiny, sweet, waxen arms uncrossed themselves and were extended as though they would enfold the whole world in their warm, loving embrace.

“Isn’t it beautiful?” whispered Johnnie in a tone that was a prayer.

Then the arms slowly folded again, and the sweet blue eyes were again curtained by the lovely lids. Jesus was asleep. After a moment’s pause

the tinkle of the *Adeste Fideles* made the silence lovely.

“ Let us sing for Santa Claus,” whispered Johnnie.

At the word both broke out into the glad notes of the Christmas hymn, and sang with the sweetness of fresh and touching voices, with the grand manner of a living faith.

Before they had ended Santa Claus threw his pistol before the shrine as an offering ; he was done with it.

“ Would you like to kiss the Infant ?” asked Minnie.

“ I dare not,” he answered hoarsely.

There was a faint sound in the distance as of a horse galloping at full speed.

“ God bless you—you—you—darlings ; God bless you, and forgive me.”

With the last words he was rushing for the door, where he disappeared as though he had not been, while nearer, louder, clearer came the tramping of the horse.

The children hurried to the door, and looked in vain for a sight of Santa Claus. Even as they were straining their eyes into the darkness there dashed up a horseman upon a foaming charger.

“ Why, it’s papa ! ” cried Minnie.

“ Merry Christmas, papa, and we’ve seen Santa Claus, and he ran away when he heard you coming.”

“ Is Witch Winnie all right ? ” cried Mr. Graham, jumping from his horse.

“ Sure ! ” answered Johnnie, and, supplemented by Minnie, he proceeded to tell of their night’s adventures.

Mr. Graham listened with his features under a forced restraint.

"It's too bad, papa, that you frightened Santy away; he didn't bring our Christmas presents yet," said Minnie when Johnnie had concluded his account.

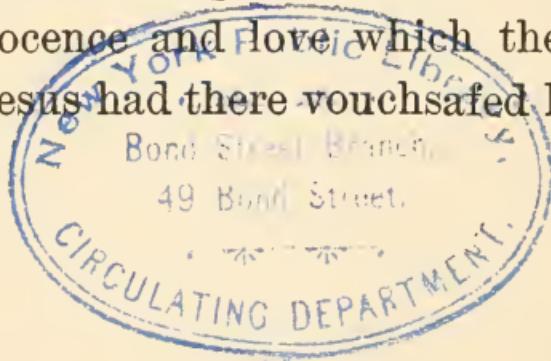
"Yes, he did; come up, my little ones, and see."

And they went up and saw. It was the finest Christmas tree in Kansas, and every gift that Minnie and Johnnie could desire was there.

"Now, my little darlings, let us go down to the crib, and thank the little Infant."

And they went down, and kneeling thanked the little Infant—Minnie and Johnnie for their beautiful Christmas gifts, and their father for the safety of Witch Winnie from the

clutches of her former groom, who had forged two telegrams, who had entered the stable as a horse-thief, had remained in it as Santa Claus, and left it touched and softened and repentant through the sweet visions of innocence and love which the Infant Jesus had there vouchsafed him.



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